

Lessons Learned In Distributing Videotapes In Demand

John R. Brooks

The Louisiana State University Agricultural Center developed a series of videotapes on farm-raised alligators, catfish, crawfish, and redfish, using special state grant funds. The organization decided to sell the tapes; nearly 300 have been sold to date throughout the U.S. and the world. The author learned that such a distribution effort can be successful if a publicity plan is developed, involving a number of people; if an outside contractor with the capacity for making many copies is used; if tax laws are considered in formulating prices for the tapes; and if special provisions are made for international customers. The organization will also develop an international reputation as a reliable source of information if the materials are marketed correctly.

In 1986, the Louisiana State University Agricultural Center was awarded a \$500,000 grant from the Louisiana Legislature, calling for the organization to develop educational materials related to aquaculture and vegetable production.

At the time the grant was awarded, many of the state's agricultural producers were searching for alternative sources of income because of poor prices for many row crops. As it turned out, the bulk of the materials produced were publications and instructional videotapes dealing with aquaculture: the farm production of species such as alligators, catfish, crawfish, and redfish.

A decision was made to sell the

materials, because we believed demand for the tapes would be heavy, since few such programs existed on these subjects. Also, by selling the tapes, we would recover some of our costs and be able to put the dollars back into supplies. Since the organization had not really been involved in such a "sales" effort of educational materials before, a lot was to be learned. This paper will examine a few of the problems/issues that we encountered and what we did.

The Tapes and Sales to Date

Four videotapes were developed, each about 20 minutes in length, with the cooperation of LSU Agricultural Center personnel and persons in other

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agencies such as the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. Each tape was designed with the prospective producer in mind. The purpose was to show what is required to successfully operate an alligator, catfish, crawfish, or redfish farm.

As of September 1990 (most recent figures available), 297 of the tapes had been sold, with the breakdown as follows: crawfish, 91; catfish, 82; alligators, 65; and redfish, 59. Tapes have been distributed to producers, university personnel, and other interested parties in 25 states (including 13 of the states in the ACE Southern Region). Sales have been made in at least seven foreign countries, two U.S. territories (Guam and Puerto Rico), and several others have expressed interest. We continue to receive new orders and questions every week.

We knew while the project was in progress that the tapes would fill a void for instructional videotapes on aquaculture, according to our aquaculture specialists. As it turned out, there continues to be great interest in these tapes, particularly from an unexpected market overseas.

Getting the Word Out

Once the tapes were completed in early 1988, one of the first problems encountered was how they would be publicized. Would the specialists in aquaculture do the publicizing or would the communications specialists do it?

In the beginning, the tapes were publicized in trade journals by the aquaculture specialists. We knew we would sell the tapes (\$30 each), but an order form was still being developed, as was an accounting system. Meanwhile, letters and checks began to arrive.

Once our accounting system was in place, tapes were made available to the National Agricultural Library in Maryland and the Louisiana State Library; we also made tapes available for

our own agents to check out and use; we also worked through the U.S. Department of Agriculture to publicize the tapes in a variety of trade journals.

Our aquaculture specialists have continued to publicize the tapes through trade journals and by making order forms available at trade shows and conferences.

The first lesson we learned was that a plan for distribution must be developed early and it should include input from all parties, including communicators, aquaculturists, administrators, and those who must deal with the accounting aspects.

Making Copies

More than 300 copies of the tapes have been made to date in-house (including copies distributed to our own agents for use in their educational programs). That's a lot of copies and it always seemed that we were running out of blanks when we had lots of copies to make. A more efficient way to handle such a large copying effort is to find an outside company, with the capacity to make many copies, to do the job. Recently, we contracted with a service in Memphis, Tenn., and the contract includes a provision to make large numbers of copies of any tape for us, at a reasonable cost.

The second lesson we learned is that if your video tapes are likely to be in great demand, get a contract in order for making lots of copies. Consider international standards problems, an issue to be discussed later.

Tax Considerations

In January of this year, my supervisor recommended that I consult with our finance director to investigate the tax laws as they relate to the tapes. He had heard that there was a change in the laws that may affect the sales of the tapes.

At first, we were told to begin charg-

ing 7 percent sales tax on the videotapes and the publications that were developed. (This was later reduced to 4 percent). Effective Jan. 1, a change in federal tax regulations put universities into a category that subjected them to sales taxes for some of the materials they sell.

The third lesson we learned is to be aware of outside influences, such as state and federal tax laws that may affect the sales of your materials. How do you learn about these issues? Check with administrators who deal with financial matters, or talk with others involved in similar programs.

The International Market

A new and unusual problem for us involved tapes made in the U.S. and sold to countries with a different video standard, making the viewing of a VHS tape impossible in many nations in Europe and in Southeast Asia, where most of our overseas inquiries were coming from.

There are at least three different video standards in the world (NTSC, PAL, SECAM), not to mention the variety of video formats, such as 3/4 U-matic, VHS, Beta, Super 8, etc. We decided early to distribute on VHS tape, so our problem in dealing with international customers was the standards conversion, usually to PAL. Fortunately, our contractor in Memphis makes such conversions for about \$15 each (depends on quantity).

We also found international customers are sometimes using obsolete formats, such as Beta. (Recently, we had to make a set of tapes in the Beta-PAL formats for a group in Indonesia at a cost of \$77 per tape. A company in Chicago did the work).

One other problem was how the international customers were going to pay us. One buyer in Southeast Asia arranged for a professor in Rhode Island to pay us in U.S. dollars. Most of the others sent international money orders,

and one sent us a "rubber" check drawn on a bank in New York. That one is still unresolved.

The fourth lesson learned was if you have a universal subject available on videotape, and make a large effort at publicity, be prepared for international customers too. Consider standards conversions and how these customers will be able to pay for the materials they order.

Good for You, Good for the Organization

There's no question that these tapes have done our organization lots of good. The publicity that has been generated, and the interest that has developed as a result, have established the LSU Agricultural Center and the organizations it encompasses (Extension Service and Experiment Station) as national and world leaders in aquaculture education. The network of aquaculture educators and leaders in the U.S. has served us well, directing people with their questions about aquaculture to us. That reputation continues today, more than two years after the first request for the tapes.

The fifth lesson we learned is that the organization has a lot to gain from such a project. But to be successful, it requires an all-encompassing plan: a publicity plan must be developed early, plenty of tapes must be available, rules about selling materials such as these must be explored and considered, and an organization must be prepared for domestic and international customers.